Black Serpent

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Contents

Parthian Empire.....3

Shirin.....15

Jerusalem.....27

Kings Chamber.....33

Land of the Serpent.....42

Parthian Empire

In the year that would later be reckoned as the first of the Arsacid era—247 years before the common counting — a new power stirred in the shadowed valleys and windswept plateaus of northeastern Iran.The land known as Parthia, ancient and rugged, lay beneath the southern slopes of the Kopet Dag mountains, where the great Dasht-e Kavir desert pressed against fertile oases like a relentless sea of sand. Here, the air carried the scent of dust and distant rain, of barley fields ripening under a fierce sun, and of horse sweat from the herds that grazed the sparse grasslands. Rivers, fed by melting snows from distant peaks, carved narrow green ribbons through the arid expanse, sustaining villages of mud-brick houses clustered around wells and irrigation channels dug by generations of patient hands.

This was a frontier world, caught between the fading grasp of the Seleucid kings—successors to Alexander's vast conquests—and the restless nomads of the northern steppes. The Parni, a fierce Dahae tribe of Scythian kin, had descended from the grasslands east of the Caspian Sea, led by their chieftain Arsaces. Seizing the moment when the Seleucid governor Andragoras dared to claim independence, Arsaces struck swiftly, overthrowing him and claiming the satrapy for his own. In the hill-ringed valley of Astauene, at the newly founded city of Asaak, he was crowned king, marking the birth of what would become the Arsacid dynasty.The young realm was small yet defiant: a loose confederation of clans and

fortified towns, from the royal stronghold at Nisa with its earthen walls and treasuries, to the wooded refuge of Hyrcania along the Caspian shores. Life here was shaped by the horse and the bow—warriors in loose trousers and belted tunics rode swift ponies across the plains, their arrows a deadly rain. Farmers tilled the soil with oxen, sowing wheat and barley in the qanat-watered fields, while shepherds tended flocks on the highlands. Trade caravans, laden with lapis from distant Bactria or incense from southern Arabia, already trickled along ancient paths that would one day weave the great Silk Road.Zoroastrian fires burned in open-air shrines, tended by magi who whispered prayers to Ahura Mazda, the lord of light and wisdom, amid a world still echoing with Hellenistic echoes—Greek coins in the markets, Seleucid-style columns in distant cities. Yet beneath it all pulsed an older Iranian spirit, of kings who claimed descent from ancient heroes, of a land where light contended eternally with shadow.In this dawn of empire, amid the dust of marching hooves and the smoke of sacred flames, the seeds of greatness—and of untold ambition—were sown.

The sun hung mercilessly above the barren plateau, a brazen disk of fire that scorched the earth and turned the air into a shimmering haze. Gulzar wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his threadbare linen tunic, the coarse fabric clinging to his lean, sun-darkened body. Flies swarmed around his face, buzzing insistently into his ears and eyes as he bent to pry yet another stone from the stubborn soil of his small wheat field. “Curse this land,” he muttered through cracked lips, hurling the rock toward the growing pile at the edge of the plot. “Curse the stones that breed faster than the grain.”His field lay isolated on a low rise, far from any other homestead. The nearest village, a cluster of mud-brick houses huddled around a communal well, was two kilometers away across the dusty plain. No neighbor’s voice ever carried on the wind to break his solitude—only the distant cry of a hawk or the dry rustle of thorny shrubs.The wheat stalks, sparse and yellowing before their time, whispered of another meager harvest. Worse still was the well at the corner of his plot: its water had sunk so low that the bucket scraped mud long before it filled. Gulzar dragged an old rope ladder from the lean-to shed beside his crumbling house, descended into the cool darkness, and began digging deeper with a worn iron spade. Each shovelful of damp earth brought faint hope, but the walls seeped only a trickle.By late afternoon he climbed out, filthy and exhausted, and trudged toward the village. His stomach gnawed at him; the single flatbread he had eaten at dawn was already a distant memory.In the small marketplace—little more than a dusty square shaded by a few plane trees—Gulzar watched with hollow envy as Bahram, a farmer from the richer eastern fields, bartered for sacks of barley, dried figs, and a cut of mutton. Bahram’s horse, a sturdy bay stallion with a glossy coat, stood tethered nearby, flicking its tail proudly.

“That beast alone is worth more than everything I own, Gulzar thought bitterly. And look at him—flesh on his bones, a silver ring on his finger. “

His own tunic was patched and faded, his sandals cracked, and the roof of his small house leaked in a dozen places whenever the rare rains came.

He bought a single round of coarse bread with his last coppers and sat in the shade beneath the wall of the village fire-temple, away from the bustle. An old man with a white beard and a patched cloak already occupied the spot, gnawing slowly on dried dates.“Hotter than Angra Mainyu’s forge today,” the old man remarked without looking up.Gulzar grunted agreement and tore off a piece of bread.

“Aye. The sun wants to bake us like clay bricks.”

They spoke of the usual things: the failing wells, the locusts that had stripped a neighbor’s vines, the endless labor that yielded barely enough to stave off hunger.After a while the old man—his name was Rostam—fished a small clay pipe from his belt pouch, packed the bowl with dark resinous crumbs, and lit it with a coal from a nearby brazier. He drew deeply, eyes half-closing as the fragrant smoke curled upward.The scent reached Gulzar: sweet, heavy, unlike any herb he knew.Rostam noticed his curiosity and held out the pipe. “Here, lad. Try a puff. It eases the ache in old bones—and young ones too.”Gulzar hesitated, then took it. The first draw burned his throat, but the second was smoother. Warmth spread through his chest, then outward like gentle waves. The buzzing flies seemed distant; the hunger in his belly quieted. His legs grew pleasantly heavy, as though rooted in soft earth, and his breathing slowed to a shallow, dreamy rhythm.

“What… what is this?” he whispered, handing the pipe back with reverence.

“Opium,” Rostam replied, smiling faintly. “The tears of the poppy. An ancient gift—older than the magi, some say. It brings sleep without care, and dreams brighter than waking life.”

Gulzar stared at the ground, colors seeming richer, the dust motes dancing like sparks of fire.

“Men trade this?”

“Some do. Caravans carry it west to the Seleucid cities, east toward the steppes. A single load fetches more silver than ten harvests of wheat.”

Gulzar’s heart quickened beneath the haze.

“How much more?”

Rostam named a price—enough to buy a strong horse, repair a roof a dozen times over, fill a larder for years.Gulzar sat silent for a long while, the opium still softening the edges of the world. When the warmth began to fade, resolve hardened in its place.

“I want to grow it,” he said at last.Rostam chuckled softly.

“The seed is not hard to find. My old friend Darius, two streets over by the potter’s kiln, keeps a sack or two. Tell him Rostam sent you—he’ll sell fair.”

That same evening, as the sun bled red across the desert horizon, Gulzar knocked at a low doorway. Darius, a wiry man with shrewd eyes, weighed out a small sack of tiny black seeds into Gulzar’s trembling hands.

“Plant them shallow after the first rains,” Darius advised.

“They drink little water, but love rich soil. Guard them well—men have killed for less.”

Gulzar paid with the last of his hoarded coppers and a promise of future share. He walked home under the rising stars, the sack clutched to his chest like a secret treasure.For the first time in years, hunger felt bearable.

Weeks blurred into one another under the relentless cycle of sun and shadow on the Parthian plateau. Gulzar toiled from dawn to dusk, his isolation a double-edged blade—free from prying eyes, yet heavy with solitude. His house, a squat mud-brick affair with reed-thatched roof still leaking in spots, stood sentinel over the expanding field, its walls daubed with fresh clay against the coming chill.Then the rains came: a rare autumn deluge from the northern skies, turning the dust to mud and filling the air with the petrichor scent of renewed earth. Gulzar waited until the soil softened but drained, then scattered the first handfuls of poppy seeds across the cleared plot—tiny black specks vanishing into the furrows he had plowed with his wooden ard, drawn by a borrowed ox from the village.Emboldened by the promise of wealth, he set to widening his holdings. His plot stretched across a vast, untamed swath of land—nearly ten acres of fallow ground inherited from his father, long neglected for lack of water and will. With spade and mattock, he cleared thorns and stones, dug new irrigation ditches from a distant stream, and built low earthen bunds to hold the moisture. Sweat soaked his tunic, calluses thickened on his palms, but within three weeks the field sprawled threefold, a fertile expanse ready for sowing.Another rain followed, gentler this time, and Gulzar planted the rest. He reserved two acres for wheat—enough to feed himself through the winter—while the remaining eight bloomed with poppy seeds, broadcast evenly and raked lightly into the soil. The field now rolled like a green promise toward the horizon, dotted with stakes marking the boundaries.In the village, Gulzar sought out Darius once more. With coppers scraped from odd labor—hauling water for a merchant's caravan—he bought the tools of the trade: a set of sharp bronze lancets for scoring the pods, a curved scraper of horn to collect the sap, a shallow clay basin for drying, and a wooden pestle for kneading. Darius, leaning on his staff in the dim light of his storeroom, shared his wisdom over cups of barley beer."You must watch the pods swell fat after the flowers fade," Darius instructed, his voice gravelly from years of smoke.

"Score them shallow at dusk—three cuts per pod, like this." He mimed the motion with a knife.

"By dawn, the white milk weeps out. Scrape it gentle, or you'll bruise the yield. Dry it slow in shade, then knead with water till it's sticky, form your balls. Beware the wind—it carries the scent to thieves."

Gulzar nodded, committing each word to memory.

"And the growing? Any secrets against the frost?"

"Plant dense but not too—let the sun kiss them all. Weed early, water sparingly; poppies thirst little but hate the wet root. Harvest when the pods rattle like old bones."

Armed with knowledge, Gulzar returned home and put it to practice. Months slipped by as winter's bite softened into spring. The wheat sprouted first, sturdy green shoots in their corner, but soon the poppies emerged: delicate seedlings unfurling into slender stems topped with feathery leaves. He weeded meticulously, pulling intruders by hand under the warming sun, his back aching from the bend.By early summer, the field transformed. Thousands of poppy plants swayed in the breeze, their flowers blooming in waves of crimson and white petals, like a sea of blood and bone under the vast sky. As the petals fell, revealing bulbous seed pods the size of hen's eggs, Gulzar began the harvest.At twilight, he moved through the rows with his lancet, scoring each pod with precise, shallow incisions—vertical lines that pierced the outer skin without delving too deep. The white latex oozed immediately, milky tears beading on the surface. He worked methodically, row by row, the air thick with the plant's bitter-sweet aroma.Come morning, the sap had oxidized to a brownish gum, hardened by the night air. With his scraper, Gulzar collected it carefully, flicking the sticky residue into his basin. Each pod yielded a scant gram or two, but across eight acres, the haul mounted: pounds of raw opium scraped over weeks, his hands stained dark and his tunic reeking of the harvest.Back at his house, he processed in the cool shade of an awning. He spread the sap on flat stones to dry further, turning it occasionally to prevent mold. Once leathery, he kneaded it in batches with the pestle, adding drops of water to bind it into a pliable mass—dark, aromatic, and potent. Finally, he shaped it into balls, each weighing precisely one hundred grams, rolled smooth between his palms and set to cure on reed mats.The first dozen balls gleamed like forbidden fruit, ready for the streets of the village or perhaps a passing caravan. Gulzar sat back, wiping his brow, a faint smile cracking his weathered face. Hunger still nipped at him, but now it carried the edge of anticipation.

Far from the young Arsacid heartland in the northeastern hills, Gulzar's isolated farm lay on the arid fringes of ancient Persis—the southern province still echoing with the grandeur of the old Achaemenid kings, though now a distant satrapy under the loosening grip of the Seleucids. His fields sprawled across the dusty plain near the small village of Matezzish, a modest cluster of mud-brick homes and date palms some twenty stadia from the shadowed ruins of Parsa—the Persians' own name for the ceremonial city the Greeks called Persepolis. Here, in the land of Fars, the air carried the faint scent of distant cypress groves and the

eternal dust of the plateau, where Zoroastrian fires still flickered in humble shrines amid lingering Hellenistic influences.With his harvest complete, Gulzar sat in the dim cool of his house one evening, the reed door ajar to let in the fading light. He crumbled a pinch of his dark, sticky opium into the bowl of his clay pipe, lit it with a glowing coal from the hearth, and drew deeply. The smoke filled his lungs—bitter-sweet, heavy—and warmth spread through his limbs like honeyed wine. Soon the world softened: the leaking roof above seemed distant, the gnawing worries of tomorrow dissolved. His eyelids drooped, barely open, as waves of euphoria washed over him, deeper and stronger than the sample he had tried with Rostam. He slumped against the wall, a foolish grin on his face, high as a rat soaring unseen in the vast Persian sky.

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He made for the tea houses near the central square—low buildings with woven reed mats for shade, where travelers, farmers, and minor traders lounged on carpets, sipping from clay cups and escaping the heat.Gulzar approached the first group cautiously, a circle of men in belted tunics and loose trousers, their heads wrapped against the glare.

“Peace upon you, friends,” he began, bowing slightly.

“I bring a remedy from the fields—a gift of ease for weary bones and troubled minds. The tears of the poppy, pure and strong.”

One man, a weathered caravan guard with a scarred cheek, looked up suspiciously.

“Poppy tears? Opium, you mean? Show us.”

Gulzar unwrapped a ball, letting the dark resin gleam in the sunlight.

“Fresh harvest. One hundred grams, rolled true. Brings dreams like no wine—pain flees, sleep comes sweet.”

The guard sniffed it, nodded.

“How much?”

“Fifty silver drachmae,” Gulzar said, naming a price high but fair—enough for a month's barley for a family, yet tempting for the relief it promised.

The man haggled briefly—“Forty, and no more”—but settled at forty-five, handing over the coins stamped with the old Seleucid profile. Gulzar pocketed them with trembling hands.He moved from tea house to tea house, discreetly offering his wares. A merchant complaining of aching joints bought two balls for ninety drachmae total, murmuring,

“This will quiet the nights better than any magus's chant.”

A young scribe, pale from long hours over tablets, took one for thirty-five drachmae after a quick puff from Gulzar's pipe to test.

“By Ahura Mazda,” he whispered, eyes widening, “it's like floating on the Caspian breeze.”

By late afternoon, fifteen balls were gone—sold for a total of nearly six hundred silver drachmae, a small fortune clinking in his pouch. Gulzar's tunic was sweat-soaked, his feet blistered, but his heart pounded with triumph as he turned homeward under the cooling sky.

Gulzar trudged the long road home from Istakhr under a sky streaked with rose and indigo, the heavy pouch of silver drachmae thumping against his hip with every step. By the time his mud-brick house came into view, exhaustion had settled deep in his bones. He barred the door, spread a fresh reed mat on the packed-earth floor, and lit his pipe once more. The opium smoke curled lazily upward, carrying away the day's aches. Soon the world dissolved into velvet darkness, and he slept deeper than he had in years, dreamless and undisturbed.Dawn found him refreshed, the pouch still real beneath his pillow. He walked briskly to Matezzish village, where the morning air carried the scent of baking bread and woodsmoke.At the carpenter’s yard he found two sturdy laborers idling over cups of watered wine.

“I need my roof made sound before the winter rains,” Gulzar told them, jingling his coins.

“Good cedar planks and flat stones for the top. I’ll pay twenty drachmae each, plus bread and meat at midday.”

The older man, broad-shouldered and named Kavad, grinned.

“Twenty each? You’ve struck fortune, friend. We’ll start tomorrow at sunrise.”Gulzar nodded.

“And while you’re there, dig me a cellar beneath the house—deep enough for jars of grain and wine to stay cool through the summer heat.”

“Another ten drachmae for the digging,” Kavad bargained.

“Done.”Next he bartered for materials: thick cedar beams from a mountain trader, flat limestone slabs, bundles of reeds for sealing. By week’s end the roof no longer leaked; rain would drum harmlessly on stone instead of dripping onto his sleeping mat. Below the floor,

the new cellar yawned cool and dark, its walls lined with clay bricks against damp.With the house secure, Gulzar returned to the market, his stride lighter. He bought a haunch of fresh mutton, rounds of warm barbari bread still steaming from the clay oven, a string of dried apricots and mulberries, pistachios in a woven sack, yogurt thick as cream, and a small jar of pomegranate molasses sharp enough to make the tongue dance. For the first time, his larder shelves groaned under plenty.At the horse corral on the edge of town he inspected a sturdy chestnut gelding—strong legs, bright eyes, no more than seven years old.

“How much?” he asked the owner.

“Two hundred fifty drachmae, with saddle and bridle thrown in,” the man replied.Gulzar counted out two hundred thirty, and the deal was sealed.

He rode home awkwardly at first, the saddle creaking beneath him, but the horse moved willingly, shortening the journey that once took a full day to mere hours.That evening he roasted mutton over his hearth, the fat sizzling and filling the house with savory smoke. He ate until his belly was full, tore bread into yogurt sweetened with mulberries, then lit his pipe again. The opium carried him gently into sleep once more.The following morning he rode to Istakhr, the horse’s hooves kicking up dust along the royal road. At the weapons bazaar near the city gate, bronze and iron gleamed on rugs spread beneath awnings.A grizzled smith with arms like knotted rope looked up as Gulzar dismounted.

“I need a blade I can trust,” Gulzar said. “Something curved, good for horse or foot.”

The smith drew a scimitar from its leather scabbard—single-edged, the curve graceful yet deadly, the hilt wrapped in ray-skin.

“Parthian iron, folded and tempered. Cuts mail like cloth. One hundred fifty drachmae.”

Gulzar tested the balance, the weight familiar in his hand.

“And a dagger to match.”

The smith produced a shorter blade, narrow and double-edged.

“Twenty more.”

Coins changed hands. Gulzar strapped the scimitar across his back, the dagger at his belt, and rode home with steel singing softly against his thigh.From that day forward, each dawn or dusk found him in the open space beside his field. He drew the curved sword and moved through forms he had watched warriors practice in the village—sweeping cuts, quick parries, thrusts from the saddle. Sweat soon traced clean paths down his dust-streaked face.

“Again,” he muttered to himself after a clumsy recovery.

“Faster this time. No man will take what is mine.”

The blade whistled through the dry air, and Gulzar's shadow lengthened across the earth.

A week slipped by in the rhythm of field and hearth, the poppy plants now stubble under Gulzar's plow as he prepared the soil for the next season. With his remaining stock carefully stored in the cool cellar, he selected forty of the finest hundred-gram balls—smooth, dark, and fragrant—wrapped them in layers of coarse linen, and tied the bundle securely to his saddle. At dawn he mounted the chestnut gelding and rode toward the great caravan road that skirted Istakhr, the ancient route linking the southern plains to the northern satrapies and, farther still, to the distant east.He chose a spot beneath a solitary tamarisk tree where the road bent around a low hill, dismounted, and waited, watering his horse from a skin while the sun climbed higher. Dust devils danced across the plain; the only sound was the occasional cry of a desert lark.Three hours passed before the caravan appeared—a long line of two-humped Bactrian camels swaying under heavy loads, bells clinking softly, led by swarthy drivers in felt caps and patched coats. At their head rode a stout, bearded merchant on a gray mule, his tunic dyed indigo and edged with faded embroidery, a curved dagger at his belt.Gulzar stepped into the road, raising a hand in greeting.

"Peace and profit to you, honorable travelers! May I offer rest and something to ease the dust of the journey?"

The caravan slowed. The bearded trader—his name, he gave as Artabanus—urged his mule forward, eyeing Gulzar and the horse with cautious interest.

“What do you sell, stranger?” Artabanus asked, voice rough from years of shouting over wind.

Gulzar smiled, drawing his clay pipe from his belt pouch. He packed the bowl with a generous pinch from one of his own balls, struck flint to tinder, and lit it.

“First a taste, freely given. Then we speak of trade.”He handed the pipe up. Artabanus took it, inhaled deeply, held the smoke, and exhaled slowly. His weathered face softened almost at once; shoulders that had been tense relaxed.“

By the sacred fires,” he murmured, passing the pipe to a driver who waited expectantly.

“This is strong and clean—no bitter aftertaste. Where did you harvest such quality?”

“From my own fields near Matezzish,” Gulzar replied.

“Pure tears, dried slow in shade. Forty balls I carry, each a full hundred grams.”

Artabanus handed the pipe back and leaned closer.

“Show me.”

Gulzar unwrapped three balls, letting the merchant weigh one in his palm and sniff its rich aroma.

“I’ll take thirty,” Artabanus said at once. “Forty drachmae each—twelve hundred silver in total. Fair?”

Gulzar pretended to consider, though his heart leapt.

“For such a respected trader, yes. Thirty at forty drachmae.”

Coins clinked—heavy silver tetradrachms bearing the worn profile of past Seleucid kings, still the common currency in these southern lands. Artabanus counted them into Gulzar’s outstretched hand while a driver transferred the wrapped bundle to a camel’s pack.

“May Ahura Mazda lighten your road,” Artabanus said with a nod.

“If you harvest more, seek me in Istakhr next spring. I travel east to Margiana twice a year.”

The caravan moved on, bells fading into the heat haze. Gulzar mounted and rode home lighter in spirit and heavier in purse.That night, in the cool gloom of his cellar, he dug a narrow hole in the packed-earth floor beneath a loose clay brick. Into it he lowered a stout pottery jar, packed the silver tightly inside, stoppered it with waxed cloth, and covered all with sifted earth. The brick settled back into place without trace. Whenever he needed coin, he would kneel, brush aside the dirt, lift the lid, and draw from his hidden store.The following days he rose early to practice with his blades. In the open space beside the house he drew the curved scimitar—its shape akin to the Parthian akinakes lengthened for

horseback—and moved through the forms he had seen warriors drill: low sweeping cuts to hamstring a foe, quick upward slashes from the saddle, circular parries that turned an enemy's thrust aside. He practiced the famous Parthian draw—spinning the horse while nocking an arrow, though he had no bow yet—translating the motion to steel. With the dagger in his left hand he worked close blocks and ripostes, stabbing low then high in the manner of steppe riders who finished fallen enemies on the ground. Steel rang against a wooden post he had set up with the flat side, again and again, until his arms burned and his breath came steady and sure.

The following week, with the poppy stubble plowed under and fresh seeds already sown for the next harvest, Gulzar wrapped twenty balls in cloth and rode once more to the caravan road. The sky was a hard, cloudless blue, the sun beating down on the dusty track as he waited beneath the same tamarisk tree. Hours passed. No great camel train appeared—only scattered travelers: a potter with donkeys laden with jars, a family heading to Istakhr for market, a pair of shepherds driving goats.Gulzar greeted each courteously, offered a quick draw from his pipe, and sold his balls one by one. A weary potter bought two for eighty drachmae, murmuring thanks for the promised relief from back pain. A shepherd took three, bargaining fiercely but paying in the end. By mid-afternoon seventeen balls were gone, the silver weighing pleasantly in the leather pouch at his waist.He sat in the thin shade to rest, sipping water from his skin, when a lone man approached on foot—tall, lean, dressed in a patched cloak, face shadowed by a wide felt cap. The stranger's eyes flicked to the bulging pouch.

"Peace, brother," the man said, voice smooth. "Hot day for waiting."

"And for walking," Gulzar replied, wary but polite. He held up one of the remaining balls.

"Care to buy? Finest opium—takes the heat away like cool mountain water."The man smiled thinly.

"I'll take something, yes." Suddenly his fist lashed out, catching Gulzar across the jaw. Pain exploded; stars danced in his vision. The stranger lunged for the pouch, fingers clawing at the ties.Gulzar's hand flashed to his belt. The dagger slid free with a whisper of steel, and in one practiced motion he drove it upward beneath the man's chin. The blade grated against bone, a sharp crack echoing as the point pierced palate and brain. The robber's eyes widened in shock, then glazed. His body went limp as an empty sack, collapsing in the dust with blood pooling dark beneath his head.Gulzar wiped the blade on the dead man's cloak, sheathed it, and patted his pouch—still secure. Without a backward glance he mounted his horse and rode home at a swift trot, the wind cooling the bruise blooming on his cheek.

Shirin

That evening, after roasting mutton and bread over his hearth, he rode the short distance to Matezzish. The village tea house glowed warmly in the dusk—lamps of sesame oil flickering on low tables, men reclining on faded carpets, the air thick with smoke and murmured talk.Gulzar chose a corner carpet, stretched out, and ordered a glass of sweetened black tea from the boy who served.

“Strong brew, and quick,” he said, tossing a copper.He packed his pipe with opium, lit it, and drew deeply, letting the familiar warmth melt the day’s tension. Nearby, a woman settled onto an adjacent carpet—young, perhaps twenty-five, with dark eyes and henna-stained hands, her veil pushed back to reveal braided hair. She filled a long-stemmed pipe with coarse tobacco and smoked in silence.Gulzar watched the blue haze rise from her lips, then spoke softly.

“Tobacco burns harsh, sister. You should try the veil of heavens instead—the breeze across open fields. It carries you far away, gentle as a dream.”

She turned, studying him with mild curiosity. “Pretty words for smoke. What do you offer that tobacco cannot?”

He smiled, crumbled a small piece of opium onto her pipe bowl atop the tobacco.

“This. One draw, and you’ll understand.”

She shrugged, lit it, and inhaled. Her eyes widened almost at once; a slow sigh escaped her.

“By the stars…” she whispered, leaning back against a bolster. “It’s like floating on warm water.”

Gulzar slid closer, sharing the carpet’s edge.

“I am Gulzar. And you?”

“Shirin,” she answered, voice already softening. “Daughter of the potter Bahram.”They spoke idly—of the dry winds, the price of grain, the distant wars men whispered about. Hours drifted by unnoticed, the tea house emptying around them.

Shirin’s cheeks flushed, her laughter light and unguarded.At last she asked, eyes half-lidded, “Where do you find such wondrous smoke?”

Gulzar leaned in, voice low. “From my own fields, not far from here. Come with me tomorrow—I’ll show you the poppies, the secret of their tears.”

She hesitated only a moment, then nodded. “I will come.”

Together they left the tea house under a sky bright with stars, mounted his horse—Shirin seated behind him, arms loosely around his waist—and rode into the quiet night toward his farm.

The next morning dawned clear and cool, a faint mist rising from the fields as Shirin arrived on foot, her veil drawn loosely against the dust. Gulzar was already outside, feeding his horse, and greeted her with a broad smile.

“Welcome to my small kingdom,” he said, gesturing across the expanse of land.

“Come, I’ll show you everything.”

He led her along the irrigation ditches, pointing out the neat rows of young poppy seedlings pushing through the dark soil—tender green leaves catching the sunlight. In the reserved corner, the wheat shoots stood sturdier, a reminder of older, leaner days.

“I kept this quarter for wheat at first,” Gulzar explained as they walked, “because a man never knows if the new crop will fail. Drought, locusts, thieves—any could take it all. But now the silver flows steady. I can buy grain from the market twice over and still have coin left.”

Shirin's eyes widened at the vast poppy field.

“So many plants… it looks like a green sea.”

They returned to the house, where Gulzar brewed tea in a small bronze pot over the hearth—strong black leaves sweetened with a lump of date sugar. He set out fresh barbari bread, yogurt thick with chopped cucumber and mint, a bowl of pistachios, and slices of melon still cool from the cellar.They ate cross-legged on clean carpets, speaking easily of village gossip, the coming spring, and the distant rumors of Arsaces’ growing power in the north. When the plates were empty, Gulzar led her outside again, to the shade of the tamarisk tree he had planted near the well.The air was warm, scented with earth and distant blossoms. He turned to her, brushed a stray lock from her face, and kissed her gently. Shirin hesitated only a heartbeat before kissing him back, her hands finding his shoulders. They slipped inside the house, drew the reed curtain across the doorway, and made love slowly on the wide sleeping platform, the afternoon light filtering through small high windows in golden bars across their skin.Two months later, beneath the same tamarisk—now leafy with new growth—they stood before the village magus. With simple rites and a small feast of roast lamb and rice, Gulzar and Shirin were wed. That same week she brought her few belongings—a carved wooden chest, embroidered cushions, her potter’s wheel—and moved into the house that no longer leaked. Gulzar sold the near last substantial batch of his stored opium balls in Istakhr, returning with enough silver to see them comfortably through the off-season. He buried fresh jars in the cellar floor and bought Shirin a necklace of lapis beads that caught the firelight like pieces of captured sky.Months turned. The deeper well now

yielded steady water; Gulzar had lined it with stone and dug until his spade struck a reliable spring. With buckets and a new shaduf lever, he watered the poppies sparingly—just enough to keep the roots strong without drowning them. The plants grew tall and vigorous, their leaves broad and healthy. One evening, as the sun bled red across the plain, Gulzar stood with Shirin on the low rise overlooking their fields. She rested her hand lightly on the gentle swell of her belly—still new, still secret between them.

“The land gives back what we give it,” she said softly.Gulzar wrapped an arm around her waist and nodded.

“And more than we ever dared ask.”

Behind them, the house stood solid and warm, smoke rising gently from the hearth. Ahead, eight acres of poppies swayed in the breeze, promising another rich harvest under the wide Parthian sky.

On an autumn day he rode into Istakhr with only a few balls left, intending to clear his stock before the winter caravans thinned.

Near the eastern corner of the market, beneath the shade of a plane tree, an old magus sat cross-legged on a small frayed carpet. His white robe was patched but clean, his long beard braided with gray thread, and a small sacred fire burned in a bronze dish before him, tended with twigs of sandalwood. A few passers-by paused to murmur prayers or leave offerings of bread.

Gulzar approached respectfully.

“Peace upon you, holy one. I bring the tears of the poppy—pure and strong. Two balls, if it please you.

”The magus—whose name was Jan—looked up with calm, piercing eyes and nodded. He weighed the dark balls in his palm, then pinched off a small piece from one and placed it on his tongue, chewing slowly.Gulzar blinked.

“Forgive me, father, but… you are supposed to smoke it.”Jan smiled faintly, the opium already softening the lines of his face. “

In the old tradition we eat it, as did our forefathers thousands of years ago, when the plant was first coaxed from the earth. Smoke is quicker, yes, but the swallowed tear unfolds more slowly—like a long prayer.”

He gestured to the carpet. “Sit, my son. Rest your feet.”

Gulzar lowered himself beside the magus, careful not to disturb the fire.Jan spoke in a low, measured voice, as though reciting from ancient tablets.

“This joy plant—hul gil, the Sumerians called it—was first tended in the lower rivers of Mesopotamia, near five thousand years past. They named it the ‘plant of joy’ and pressed its milk for healing and for visions. From them it passed to the Assyrians and Babylonians, who mixed it with wine for the sick and the dying.

“When our Persian kings—Cyrus, Darius—conquered those lands, the knowledge came with the tribute. In the great storehouses of Persepolis and Susa, jars of opium were sealed and labeled, kept for the king’s physicians, for rituals in the fire temples, perhaps even for the Immortals when pain threatened their duty. So it has been with us ever since: a gift of the earth, guarded by both healer and priest.”

Gulzar listened, entranced. “I knew only that it grew well in my soil and brought silver.”

Jan’s eyes half-closed as the opium deepened its hold. “You could carry it far and grow richer still. West along the royal road to the Greek cities and the Mediterranean, or east—beyond Bactria, across the high passes—to the lands of Seres where silk comes from. The farther east it travels, the higher the price: merchants say a single load doubles in value by the time it reaches the Jade Gate. Yet the road is long, full of tolls and bandits. Easier, perhaps, to sell here to the traveling caravans. They pay fair coin and take the risk themselves.”

Gulzar nodded slowly, then drew his own pipe, packed it, and lit it from a coal in the sacred fire. He inhaled deeply, the familiar warmth spreading through his chest. For a long while they sat in blissful silence—only the faint crackle of sandalwood, the distant calls of merchants, and the soft breathing of two men adrift on the same gentle current.At last Jan spoke again, voice dreamy.

“All things in balance, my son. The plant gives joy, but also sleep too deep. Use it wisely, sell it wisely. Spirits watch both giver and taker.”

Gulzar exhaled a thin stream of smoke toward the sky.

“I will remember, father.”

They remained there until the sun dipped behind the city walls, two shadows lengthening on the dusty ground, bound for a time by the ancient tears of the poppy.

The sun had slipped lower, casting long shadows across the Istakhr marketplace, yet Gulzar and the magus Jan remained on the small carpet, the sacred fire now a bed of glowing coals. The opium held them both in its gentle embrace—thoughts slow and deep, words emerging like ripples on still water.Jan spoke again, his voice soft, almost a chant.

“There is a gathering beyond the common fires, my son. Men and women who see this world not as Ahura Mazda’s perfect creation, but as a shadowed prison—a place of mixture, pain, and forgetting. Above it, far beyond the turning sky, lies a realm of pure light,

unchanging, without sorrow or decay. The soul comes from that light, falls into this darkness, and longs only to return." Gulzar drew slowly on his pipe, eyes half-lidded.

"And the body? The fields, the silver, the pleasure of flesh?"

"Chains," Jan replied, gesturing vaguely at the bustling market.

"Beautiful chains, perhaps, but chains all the same. All that is born here must die; all that is mixed here must one day be separated. The true seeker turns his gaze inward, away from the lies of matter." He paused, feeding a last pinch of sandalwood to the coals; sweet smoke curled between them.

"Along the distant riverbanks, in caves and reed huts, live hermits who keep the ancient way. They pour water over themselves in hidden rites, using opium and sacred herbs to loosen the soul from its cage. They say this is the true baptism—not of fire alone, but of water and spirit—handed down from a cosmic order older than the kingdoms of men."

"Those who join us are strange brothers: sons of old fire priests who grew weary of court ritual, wandering dervishes seeking deeper ecstasy, even scarred warlords who tired of blood and banners. Some still honor Zarathustra openly, others in secret. All are bound by one hidden book, one shared vision seen clearest in the opium dream—light trapped in darkness, yearning for release."

Jan leaned closer, his eyes gleaming faintly in the fading light.

“Once a month, when the moon wanes, we gather in the ruined terraces east of the city—where the old palaces crumble into dust. Beneath them lie catacombs, cool and silent. There, on a stone altar, we place fresh opium beside bowls of clear water strewn with white flowers and silver coins that catch the torchlight. We sing of the light above, and the darkness below, and the narrow path between.”

Gulzar felt a stir within him—curiosity sharper than any blade.

“You would have me come?”Jan smiled, the opium softening his features into something almost youthful.

“Come, and listen. Taste the teaching as you have tasted the plant. The gate is open to any whose heart hungers for more than silver and soil. There is always someone in the ruins.”

He gave precise directions: follow the dry riverbed beyond the eastern gate for three stadia, turn north at the broken column carved with lions, descend the cracked stairs hidden by tamarisk.

“Ask for Jan of the inner circle. They will bring you below.

”Then, with slow deliberation, the magus rose. He quenched the fire with a handful of earth, rolled his small carpet, gathered his incense pouch and bronze dish, and tucked the two opium balls into his robe.

“May the light you seek find you first,” he said in parting, bowing slightly.

Gulzar watched the white-robed figure thread through the thinning crowd until he vanished among the shadows of the arcades. Only the faint scent of sandalwood and opium lingered on the warm evening air. For a long while Gulzar sat alone, pipe cooled in his hand, staring at the place where the magus had been. The market noises seemed distant now, muffled, as though the world itself had thinned. In his mind echoed Jan’s words: a realm of pure light, a prison of matter, a hidden altar beneath the earth. He rose at last, mounted his horse, and rode homeward under the first stars, the silver pouch heavy at his belt—but heavier still the new weight of questions in his heart.

Weeks melted into one another on the sun-baked plains of Persis, the poppy seedlings unfurling slowly into sturdy stems under Gulzar’s watchful eye. He weeded the rows with care, channeling water from the deepened well in measured trickles to avoid rot, while the wheat plot flourished in its corner like an old friend. Shirin moved through their days with quiet grace—stirring pots of ash-e reshteh thick with noodles and herbs over the hearth, sweeping the earthen floors until they gleamed, mending tunics by lamplight. Their love was a steady flame: stolen glances across the field, her hand in his as they shared evening tea, the warmth of her body beside him in the night chasing away the chill of solitude he had once known. As autumn deepened, Gulzar’s thoughts turned often to the magus Jan and his veiled words of light and shadow. One crisp morning, with the harvest still months away, he

saddled his horse and rode eastward from Matezzish, following the dry riverbed beyond Istakhr's gate for three stadia. At the broken column etched with faded lions—relics of Achaemenid glory—he turned north and descended the cracked stone stairs hidden among tamarisk bushes, leading into the earth.At the entrance to the ruins stood a scarred warlord, his face a map of old battles, a heavy scimitar slung across his broad back. He leaned against a weathered pillar, eyes sharp beneath bushy brows.

"Hold," the warlord rumbled, hand resting on his hilt. "What seeker comes to these shadows?"

Gulzar dismounted, meeting the gaze steadily.

"I am Gulzar, a farmer from near Matezzish. I seek Jan, the old magus. He spoke of teachings here—of light and the path through darkness."

The warlord studied him a moment, then nodded.

"Jan awaits below. Follow, and speak no falsehoods in this place."

He led Gulzar down winding stairs into a cool subterranean chamber, its walls of ancient brick flickering with torchlight. Incense burned in a shallow bronze bowl, filling the air with sandalwood and myrrh. Jan sat cross-legged on a faded Persian carpet woven with motifs of fire and stars, his eyes closed, breathing slow and even.Gulzar approached quietly.

"Peace upon you, father Jan."

The magus opened his eyes, a faint smile breaking his serene mask. "Gulzar. The light draws you at last. Sit, my son."

Gulzar settled onto the carpet opposite, the cool stone soothing after the ride. "What is this you do here? How fares your path?"

Jan gestured to the dim space. "I practice the ancient tradition of the inner light. One closes the eyes, quiets the mind, and waits in stillness until the divine spark reveals itself—not as flame or vision, but as a pure glow within. It is the soul's true home, calling us back from this veil of illusion. It goes well, though the path is long."

Gulzar nodded thoughtfully, glancing at the altar in the corner: a low stone slab adorned with opium balls, white water-lilies floating in silver bowls, a few strange statues and scattered coins glinting like captured moonlight.

"You spoke of the material realm being a trap, a suffering. But how do you get free from it ? The greed that clings to a man—the want for silver, land, even love? How does one shed it all, like an old skin?"

Jan's eyes gleamed with quiet fervor.

“Ah, the chains of desire. For that, we turn to the teachings of an old sage named Diogenes of Sinope—a Persian wanderer in spirit, though born on the edges of our world. He scorned wealth as a thief of peace, lived outdoors in simplicity, and mocked the vanities of kings and merchants alike.”

Gulzar leaned forward.

“Tell me of him. How did he live free?”

“Diogenes was calm like a turtle in its shell,” Jan continued, voice weaving the tale like a chant.

“He dwelt in a simple barrel on the streets of great cities, owning nothing but a cloak, a staff, and a bowl for begging. Men despised him for his ragged ways, calling him animal-like —cynic, they named his path—but he remained true, patient as stone, thinking in peace amid the chaos.”

“He taught that true happiness lies not in gold or power, but in self-mastery. Once, when the great conqueror Alexander came to him, offering any boon, Diogenes—lazing in the sun —replied only, ‘I have no need for this, and yet I can compete in happiness with you.’ He showed that kings are slaves to ambition, while the sage is free.”

“Another time, he wandered the marketplace at midday with a lit lantern, declaring, ‘I search for an honest man.’ He pierced the lies men tell themselves—of status, of wealth—as illusions that bind the soul. Eat simply, he said: lentils and water over feasts that sicken. Sleep on the earth, for beds soften the body and weaken the will. Shun possessions, for they possess you in turn. And on greed? He flung away a cup when he saw a child drink from his hands, crying, ‘A boy has bested me in plain living!’ Diogenes is one of our cult’s grandmasters—a guide to stripping the false self, revealing the light beneath. Follow his way, and the want fades like morning mist.”

Gulzar sat silent, the words sinking deep.

“A barrel for a home… a lantern for truth. It sounds mad, yet wise.”Jan chuckled softly.

“Mad to the world, wise to the seeker. Meditate on it, Gulzar. The light waits for those who let go.”

They spoke longer into the afternoon, the incense smoke curling like questions unanswered, until Gulzar rose to leave, his mind awhirl with the sage’s stark lessons.

Spring stirred the land with tentative warmth, the poppy plants now knee-high and budding fat pods that promised another bountiful harvest. Yet Gulzar’s hidden jars of silver had thinned through the winter—generous gifts to Shirin, repairs to the house, fine cloth for the coming child. The teachings of Jan and the cult lingered in his thoughts like smoke, pulling one way, while the practical hunger for security pulled another. One dusk, as he sat

sharpening his dagger by the hearth, a darker idea took root.The old kings slept with their treasures. Not the great tombs—those were watched, revered, too high or too sacred—but the lesser graves scattered around the ancient capitals. Common nobles, satraps' kin, merchants buried with their finery. No guards watched them now. The earth kept its own silence.

He told Shirin only that he would ride to distant markets for a week or two. She kissed him worriedly but asked no questions.At dawn he saddled the chestnut gelding, packed flatbread, dried mulberries, a waterskin, his scimitar and dagger, a short iron pry bar, and a large cloth sack folded small. He rode north and east, skirting villages, following old tracks that skirted the main royal road. Five days of steady travel across the high plateau—past salt flats shimmering white, through sparse pistachio woodlands, over low passes where snow still lingered in shadows—until the plain opened and the broken silhouette of Persepolis rose against the mountains.Even in ruin, the Terrace of Persepolis commanded awe. Charred columns thrust skyward like blackened spears; vast stairways carved with processions of tribute-bearers—Medes, Persians, Egyptians, Indians—marched eternally upward though the palaces above them had crumbled to ash and rubble. Wind whispered through empty doorways once framed in gold and lapis. A few pilgrims and shepherds wandered the site, leaving offerings at fallen altars, but the vastness swallowed them.Gulzar tethered his horse in a dry wadi and walked the fringes at twilight, eyes scanning for lesser mounds. He avoided the great platform itself—too open, too visited—and turned instead toward the scattered cemeteries beyond the terraces, where minor nobles and officials had been laid in rock-cut chambers or simple shaft graves two centuries earlier.The first night he found nothing but wind-scoured stone.

On the second, near a cluster of low hills south of the terrace, he located an unremarkable row of shaft tombs—narrow vertical pits sealed with flat slabs, half-buried by drifting sand. No inscriptions marked them as royal; these were the resting places of forgotten courtiers.He waited until the moon set, then worked quietly with the pry bar. The first slab shifted with a gritty scrape. Peering down with a small oil lamp, he saw bones wrapped in rotted linen, a clay jar shattered by time, and—glinting faintly—a thin gold necklace still circling a skeletal neck. His heart quickened. He lowered himself on a rope, the air cool and thick with ancient dust.The necklace came free easily, heavy links worked with tiny lions. On the bony fingers: two gold rings set with carnelian. In a niche, a silver drinking cup, green with verdigris but intact, and a handful of silver sigloi scattered like forgotten seeds. He gathered all into his cloth sack, gentle despite his haste, then climbed out and resealed the grave as best he could.

On the third night, as Gulzar lowered himself into a promising shaft grave—its slab pried aside under the cover of deep shadow—hoofbeats echoed faintly across the ruins. He froze, lamp extinguished, and climbed back to peer from the edge. Three riders approached on shaggy ponies, cloaked figures dismounting with the stealth of jackals. Grave robbers, like

him—scarred faces lit by a sliver of moon, curved blades at their belts, one carrying a coiled rope and pick.They spotted his horse tethered nearby and closed in, eyes gleaming at the half-filled sack beside the open grave.

“Yours?” the leader snarled, a burly man with a notched ear, drawing his curved knife.

“Hand over the loot, farmer, or we’ll bury you with the bones.”

Gulzar stood slowly, hand on his hilt.

“This haul is mine. Ride on—there are graves enough for all.”

The second laughed, a wiry thief with missing teeth.

“We take what we want.” He lunged with a dagger, aiming for Gulzar’s gut.

Gulzar sidestepped, drawing his scimitar in a fluid arc. The blade whistled through the air, catching the leader—who charged roaring—across the neck. Steel bit deep; a spray of blood arced black in the moonlight as the head tumbled free, body crumpling like a felled tree.The wiry one slashed again, grazing Gulzar’s arm. Pain flared, but he twisted, drawing his dagger with his off-hand and driving it upward into the thief’s throat. A wet gurgle escaped as the man clutched the wound, blood bubbling between fingers, collapsing in a twitching heap.The third robber, youngest and fastest, circled with twin knives, stabbing low. Gulzar parried with the scimitar, then feinted high and plunged his dagger into the youth’s stomach, twisting the blade, ripped and the mans intestines fell out. The robber gasped,

eyes wide in shock, as Gulzar yanked free and stabbed again—higher this time, piercing the throat for good measure. The body slumped, lifeless, into the dust.Gulzar stood panting amid the carnage, blood slick on his blades and tunic. He wiped them clean on a dead man's cloak, gathered his sack, and dragged the bodies into the open grave before sealing it shut. The ruins swallowed the violence as silently as they had the ancient dead.

Over the next three nights he moved methodically—never the same area twice, always under cover of darkness. Another shaft yielded a woman's hoard: delicate gold earrings shaped like pomegranates, a silver mirror, armlets of electrum. A third held a warrior's gear: a bronze dagger with ivory hilt, a torque of twisted gold, more coins. No grand fortunes, but steady riches—enough gold and silver to feed a family comfortably for two years, perhaps three if spent wisely.He camped in hidden gullies, eating cold rations, speaking to no one. The ruined grandeur of Persepolis loomed always on the horizon—silent, accusing, yet indifferent. Once he passed close to Naqsh-e Rostam at dusk: the towering rock facades of the royal tombs glowing red in the setting sun, crosses of kings carved deep, unreachable. He felt their stone eyes upon him and turned away. Cyrus' tomb at Pasargadae he avoided entirely—too revered, too watched by distant shepherds.On the seventh day the sack hung heavy at his saddlebow, wrapped now in an old blanket to muffle any clink. Gulzar turned the horse homeward, riding harder now, five days of dust and wind until the familiar outline of his own low hill appeared.He arrived at twilight, unsaddled the weary gelding, and buried the loot in a new hiding place deeper in the cellar—gold and silver wrapped separately in oiled cloth, safe from damp. Shirin greeted him with relief and warm bread, asking only if the journey had been profitable.

"Very," he said, kissing her, the taste of ancient dust still on his tongue.

That night he lay awake long after she slept, listening to the wind rattle the new roof tiles. The weight of stolen centuries pressed against his thoughts—beautiful metal once worn in life, now cold in his earth. Jan's words returned unbidden: All that we grasp slips through the fingers like sand.Yet the sack was real, the coin was real, and the child would be born into comfort rather than want.Gulzar turned toward Shirin's warmth and closed his eyes, but sleep came slow, threaded with dreams of empty graves and staring stone kings.

Months swept by in the rhythm of the seasons, the vast poppy fields bursting into crimson waves under the Parthian sun. Gulzar's harvest swelled beyond his wildest hopes—eight acres yielding pounds upon pounds of thick, dark sap. He hired men from Matezzish and nearby hamlets: sturdy farmers and their sons to score the pods at dusk, scrape the tears at dawn, and haul the basins back to the shaded awning. The work hummed with efficiency, laughter and sweat mingling in the air.In the cool of his house, Gulzar processed the raw opium alone, kneading it into pliable masses and rolling them into smooth, hundred-gram balls—glossy and black as polished obsidian.

"Black Serpent," he named it, for its color and the slow, coiling potency that struck deep.

One evening, with the last balls curing on reed mats, he crumbled a generous pinch into his pipe, lit it, and drew long and deep. The smoke filled him utterly—richer, stronger than any before. He held it until his lungs burned, then exhaled in a languid cloud. The world tilted; strength ebbed from his limbs like water from a cracked jar. His eyelids drooped heavy as stone, breath slowed to a whisper, and a profound calm settled over him, satisfaction blooming warm in his chest. He staggered into the house, collapsed onto the sleeping platform, and fell into a black, dreamless void.Shirin found him there at dusk, shaking his shoulder gently.

“Gulzar, husband—wake. The stew is ready, lamb with lentils and pomegranate.”

He roused slowly, grinning foolishly.

“The harvest… it is good. Better than good.”

They ate together by lamplight—thick bread dipped in yogurt, roasted meat fragrant with herbs—her hand resting on the curve of her belly as their child stirred within.The next morning Gulzar rode to the ruined terraces east of Istakhr. The scarred warlord nodded recognition and led him below to the vaulted chamber. Jan sat meditating before the altar, incense curling from the bronze bowl.Gulzar greeted him warmly.

“Peace, father Jan. I bring a gift.” He offered five of his new balls

.Jan took it, pinched off a piece, and chewed slowly, eyes half-closing in appreciation. He packed a piece into the shared pipe and passed it. Gulzar smoked, the familiar haze deepening.

“This is strong as night itself,” Jan murmured.

“You have mastered the plant.”

They sat in companionable silence until Jan spoke again.

“There is a branch of our fellowship far west, in the city of Jerusalem—beyond the rivers, in the land the Greeks call Judea. The brothers there guard an ancient line of the teaching, but they lack certain… aids to vision. And there is a relic here, sacred to us—a figure of an ancient demon, bound in pure gold, that must reach them. It is vital for their rites.”

Gulzar leaned forward. “You wish me to carry it?”

Jan nodded. “And some of your Black Serpent, if you can spare it. The road is long, but safe enough for a lone rider with coin. Follow the old royal way northwest to Ecbatana, then west through Arbela and Nineveh to the Tigris. Cross at Seleucia or Ctesiphon—ferries run there—and continue along the caravan tracks through Mesopotamia, past Palmyra’s oasis if you skirt the desert, or straight to Damascus. From Damascus, take the King’s Highway south through the lands of Moab and Edom, or the coastal Via Maris through Gaza if you

prefer the sea air. Either leads to Jerusalem. Ask in the lower city for the house of Eleazar the Essene—he knows our signs."

He pressed a heavy pouch into Gulzar's hand—five hundred silver drachmae, gleaming with Seleucid stamps—and a wrapped bundle: a golden figurine, twisted and horned, cool to the touch.Gulzar weighed the gold, eyes widening.

"This is generous, father. I will go. In a few days, when the house is settled."

Jan clasped his arm.

"The light travels with those who carry it. Return when you can—or stay and seek deeper there."

Gulzar rode home as the sun bled across the plain. That night he packed for the journey: dried meat and fruits, flatbread, a waterskin, spare tunic and cloak, his scimitar and dagger, ten balls of Black Serpent wrapped carefully, the golden relic hidden in a false bottom of his saddlebag.Shirin watched quietly, worry in her eyes, but said only, "Come back to us whole."

He kissed her fiercely. "I will. And richer in more than silver."

In three days he would ride west, toward the setting sun and the distant city of stone and prophecy.

Jerusalem

Three days after his meeting with Jan, Gulzar kissed Shirin farewell at dawn, promising again to return before the child quickened strongly. He packed methodically: saddlebags bulging with flatbread, dried mutton, apricots and pistachios, two large waterskins, a spare wool cloak and tunic, twenty balls of Black Serpent wrapped in oiled cloth, the golden demon relic sewn into a hidden pouch beneath his saddle. His scimitar hung at his back, dagger at his belt. With a final look at the poppy fields—now lush and green—he mounted the chestnut gelding and rode west.The journey stretched across nearly a thousand miles of ancient roads, a lone rider's pace averaging twenty-five to thirty miles a day with rest for the horse. Nothing dramatic marked the path—only the slow turning of landscapes, the bite of weather, and fleeting encounters with fellow travelers.

He followed the royal road northwest through Persis and into Media, the high plateau giving way to rolling hills dotted with oak and wild almond. Spring rains turned the tracks to mud; he sheltered one night beneath an overhang while thunder rolled overhead and lightning lit the distant Zagros peaks. Another evening he shared a tavern fire in a mud-brick caravanserai near Ecbatana—once the great Median capital, now a Parthian stronghold—trading stories with Syrian merchants over watered wine and roast goat.Beyond Ecbatana

the road descended toward Mesopotamia. The air grew heavier, scented with river mud. At the Tigris he paid a ferryman to cross with the horse, the broad brown water swirling past. Westward again through the flat alluvial plains: fields of barley and date palms, irrigation canals glinting like silver threads, the ruins of Nineveh a low mound on the horizon.

He slept outdoors more often than in taverns—rolling his cloak tight against the spring chill that still lingered at night, shivering until the stars faded and the first warmth of dawn reached him. One storm caught him on the open steppe west of Arbela: wind howling, rain lashing sideways, forcing him to huddle in the lee of a ruined watchtower until it passed.In the Syrian desert he joined a small caravan for three days—camels and donkeys laden with silk and spices—sharing bread with a laconic Palmyrene guide who spoke little but pointed out safe wells. The landscape turned arid: red sand, black basalt outcrops, the occasional oasis where palms clustered like green miracles. Heat shimmered by day; nights grew bitterly cold.From Damascus—bustling with Greek columns and Aramaic voices—he turned south along the King's Highway, skirting the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. The land rose into rugged hills of limestone and flint, terraced with olive groves and vineyards. Shepherds watched their flocks from stone enclosures; Roman-style milestones, still new under Ptolemaic rule, marked the miles.He passed through Philadelphia and Rabbath-Ammon, sleeping in modest inns where the innkeepers took his Parthian silver without question. The air carried the scent of thyme and cedar. Spring flowers carpeted the wadis in fleeting color.

At last, after nearly twenty days on the road—horse lean but sound, Gulzar's face weathered darker by sun and wind—the hills parted and Jerusalem appeared on its high plateau, walled and golden in the late afternoon light. The city rose in tiers: the great temple platform dominating the east, smoke from sacrifices drifting skyward, the lower city sprawling with narrow streets and markets alive with voices in Aramaic, Greek, and a dozen other tongues.Gulzar guided his weary gelding through the Damascus Gate, the clamor of the city washing over him—merchants hawking figs and oil, priests in white linen, Roman auxiliaries on patrol. He found a modest stable near the lower market, paid for hay and a stall, and stood a moment in the street, dust of the long road still on his boots.Jerusalem. The relic weighed heavy in its hidden pouch, the Black Serpent balls secure beside it. Somewhere in this city of stone and prayer, Eleazar the Essene waited.

The streets of Jerusalem teemed with life—merchants crying their wares in Aramaic and Greek, pilgrims in rough cloaks pressing toward the great Temple Mount, the scent of incense and roasting meat thick in the air. Gulzar, dust of the long road still clinging to his tunic, asked discreetly in the lower markets for Eleazar the Essene. Most shrugged or eyed him suspiciously, but an old water-seller with a lined face nodded knowingly.

"Eleazar? Follow me, stranger. Not many ask for him openly."

The man led Gulzar through a maze of narrow alleys in the southwestern quarter of the city, near Mount Zion—twisting passages barely wide enough for two men abreast, shadowed by

overhanging balconies and stone arches. They descended worn steps, past the ancient Essene Gate in the old city wall, until they reached a modest house of dressed stone, its door unmarked save for a faint carving of a palm.A silent brother opened to their knock, glanced at the water-seller, and beckoned Gulzar inside. The man guided him through a dim corridor to a hidden stairwell descending into the cool bedrock beneath. Torchlight flickered on rough-hewn walls as they entered a subterranean chamber—part natural cave, part carved vault—its air heavy with the scent of water and earth.There, on a simple reed mat before a low stone altar, sat Eleazar: an elderly man in plain white linen, bearded and ascetic, sipping clear water from a clay cup. His eyes, sharp beneath heavy brows, fixed on Gulzar with quiet appraisal.Gulzar bowed deeply.

"Peace be upon you, Eleazar. I am Gulzar, come from the east—from Persis. Jan the magus sends me with tidings and gifts."

Eleazar set down his cup and rose slowly. "Jan lives still? The light preserves him. Speak, brother—what do you bear?"

From his cloth bag Gulzar drew the golden demon relic—twisted horns and serpentine form gleaming in the torchlight—and ten balls of Black Serpent, placing them reverently on a woven carpet before the altar.

"The statue as requested, and this opium—strong and pure—to aid your visions."

Eleazar's face softened with gratitude. He unwrapped the relic, holding it to the light.

"The bound one returns to us. Thanks be to the hidden light."

He pressed a small pouch of silver—two hundred drachmae—into Gulzar's hand.

"For your road and loyalty."T

hen he gestured around the chamber. "Come, see our sanctuary."

The underground temple was spare yet potent: walls etched with faint symbols of light piercing darkness, bowls of fresh water on low pedestals, a central altar of unhewn stone. Upon it coiled a bronze serpent, multi-headed and menacing, its eyes inlaid with dark gems.Eleazar touched the figure reverently.

"This is Aži Dahāka—the great serpent of old, called later Zahhāk in the tongues of men. Not a petty spirit, but a primordial power from the depths: three-headed dragon of chaos, bearer of corruption, forbidden knowledge, blood, and domination. In the ancient scriptures of our Persian forebears, he stands against the cosmic order—a chthonic tyrant whose very form warns of power twisted into predation, knowledge divorced from truth."In later tales he becomes a fallen king, serpents sprouting from his shoulders, feeding on the brains of men. This is no gentle myth; it carries the memory of warning—the serpent as devourer, the lie that promises freedom but binds in shadow."

Gulzar stared at the coiled form, a chill tracing his spine despite the opium warmth lingering in his veins. He bowed low before the altar, lit a small beeswax candle from a torch, and set it flickering in respect.Eleazar murmured a low chant in an ancient tongue—words of binding the serpent, of light prevailing over the abyss—his voice echoing softly off the stone.When the chant faded, Eleazar turned to Gulzar, eyes intense.

“You have served us well, traveler. But there is more if your arm is strong. In this city a rival order grows bold—false priests who twist the light into earthly power, threatening our hidden way. Their gatherings profane the true path.“

“Their temple lies in the upper city, near the Hasmonean palace—a house marked with the eagle banner, its inner chamber defiled with idols of gold and blood rites. Desecrate it—scatter their altars, burn their false scrolls—if the light guides your hand. Return word when it is done, and greater reward awaits.”

Gulzar met his gaze, the weight of the request settling like the cool underground air.

“I will consider your words, Eleazar. The road has taught me much of shadows.”

He bowed once more and climbed the stairs into the blinding Jerusalem sun, the serpent’s coiled image burning behind his eyes.

Night cloaked Jerusalem in deep shadow, the city's lamps flickering like scattered stars along the winding streets. Gulzar waited until the moon hung low, then slipped from his lodging near the lower market, cloak drawn tight, scimitar and dagger hidden beneath. He climbed

the steep paths to the upper city—past the looming walls of the Hasmonean palace, its towers silent under guard—until he found the house Eleazar had described: a sturdy stone dwelling with a carved eagle banner fluttering faintly above the gate.The hour was late; the streets empty save for distant dogs. The door stood ajar, a sliver of lamplight spilling onto the stone threshold. Gulzar eased inside, footsteps silent on the tiled floor. In the inner chamber four priests in flowing robes knelt or sat around a gilded altar laden with golden statues—idols of winged figures and beasts—murmuring prayers over open scrolls.None noticed him at first, their chants low and rhythmic. Gulzar's hand closed on his scimitar hilt. He drew the curved blade in a whisper of steel and stepped forward.The nearest priest, standing before the altar with arms raised, never turned. Gulzar thrust violently upward, the point piercing beneath the ribs and driving deep into the chest. The man gasped, eyes wide, blood bubbling at his lips as he slumped forward over the altar.A second priest leapt from his seated position, mouth opening in alarm. Gulzar swung in a wide arc—the scimitar slashed across the throat, parting flesh in a crimson spray. The body staggered, hands clutching the wound, then crumpled.The third priest screamed—a high, piercing wail that echoed off the walls. He scrambled backward, but Gulzar hacked downward, blade biting into both legs just above the knees. Bone cracked; the man toppled shrieking, blood pooling dark. Gulzar drove the sword into his back, twisting once for silence.The fourth priest snatched a heavy bronze candlestick from a side table and swung desperately. It caught Gulzar on the side of the neck—pain exploded, warm blood trickling down his shoulder. Gulzar roared, thrusting low and upward: the scimitar plunged into the man's stomach, ripping through flesh and vitals, the point bursting out the neck in a gush. He yanked the blade free; the body fell like a sack, twitching once before stilling.

Heavy footsteps pounded from an adjoining room—two armed men bursting in, household guards in tunics, curved daggers gleaming. They charged without word.The first kicked viciously, boot slamming into Gulzar's stomach. Air exploded from his lungs; he flew backward into a low table, scrolls and vessels crashing to the floor in a clatter of gold and clay.Gulzar rolled, slashing upward as the man closed—the scimitar ripped across his face from jaw to brow, flesh parting in a wet ruin. The guard screamed, hands to his ruined features, collapsing in a faint.The second leapt onto Gulzar's back, arm snaking around his throat in a crushing strangle. The sword was pinned useless; breath choked off. Gulzar clawed for his dagger, drew it, and stabbed backward into the man's knee—once, twice. Cartilage crunched; the grip loosened. He twisted the blade into the strangling hand, feeling tendon sever. The guard howled, releasing him.Gulzar spun, seized his fallen scimitar, and hacked with all his fury. The blade caught the man across the neck—clean through flesh and bone. The head toppled, body spurting as it dropped.Panting amid the carnage, blood slick on his hands and neck, Gulzar turned to the altar. He toppled the golden statues one by one—heavy thuds echoing as they crashed and dented. With the fallen candlestick he smashed others, faces and wings crumpling under brutal blows. Scrolls he gathered into a pile, lit from a lamp's flame, and hurled onto the altar cloth. Fire caught swiftly, licking up draperies and wooden beams, smoke billowing thick and acrid.

He lingered only long enough to see the flames roar high, then slipped out the open door into the night. Behind him, the house glowed orange against the dark, cries of alarm beginning to rise from neighboring roofs.Gulzar melted into the alleys, pulse thundering, the taste of iron in his mouth. The deed was done—desecration complete. By dawn he would be far from the upper city, the serpent's warning echoing in his blood-soaked thoughts.

Dawn bled pale over Jerusalem as Gulzar, neck bruised and crusted with dried blood, descended once more into the hidden chamber beneath Mount Zion. Eleazar awaited him, seated as before, the golden demon relic now gleaming on the altar beside the coiled bronze serpent.Gulzar knelt, voice low.

“It is done. The house burns even now. Their idols lie broken, their priests and guards silent.”

Eleazar’s eyes shone with fierce approval.

“Well struck, brother. The false light is dimmed this night. Aži Dahāka himself approves—chaos turned against chaos, the tyrant’s own hunger fed upon his servants.”

He rose and pressed another pouch into Gulzar’s hand—heavy with three hundred more silver drachmae—then drew a small bundle wrapped in dark linen from beneath his robe.

“This must return east to Jan. Guard it as you guarded the first relic.”

Gulzar tucked it carefully into his belt. “I will deliver it with my life.”

Eleazar clasped his shoulder. “Rest now. The light watches over its blades.”

A silent brother led Gulzar to a small side chamber with a straw pallet and wool blanket. Exhaustion crashed over him like a desert storm; he slept without dreams, the distant echo of flames and steel fading into silence.At midday the next day he woke to bread, dates, and cool water pressed into his hands.

“Eat, traveler,” the brother murmured. “The road home is long.”

Gulzar thanked him, mounted his rested horse, and rode out through the Damascus Gate, turning east along the same ancient highways that had brought him west. The return took twenty hard days—skirting spring floods in Moab, enduring sand-laden winds across the Syrian desert, sharing brief fires with caravans under star-drenched skies. No pursuit followed; the burning house had been blamed on careless lamps, or so the rumors ran in the markets he passed.At last, on a golden evening, the familiar hills of Persis rose before him. He urged the weary gelding into a trot, dust swirling behind, until his mud-brick house appeared on the low rise. Shirin stood in the doorway, belly rounded now with late pregnancy, eyes wide with relief and joy. He dismounted, swept her into his arms, and kissed her long and deep, tasting home on her lips.

“My heart,” she whispered, “you are whole.”

“Barely,” he laughed softly, “but whole enough.”

He tended the horse, ate the stew she had kept warm, and fell into their bed. Sleep claimed him for two full days and nights—deep, unbroken, the weight of blood and road sloughing away like old skin.

Kings Chamber

On the third morning he rose renewed, kissed Shirin again, and rode to the ruined terraces east of Istakhr. The scarred warlord recognized him at once and led him below without a word.Jan sat before the altar, incense curling. His face lit with quiet pleasure as Gulzar entered.

“You return, seeker. The light preserved you.”

Gulzar bowed and drew forth the linen-wrapped bundle. “From Eleazar in Jerusalem. With his blessing—and mine.”

Jan unwrapped it slowly, revealing an ancient dagger: blade of pale gold, handle of carved ivory yellowed by millennia, its pommel shaped like a radiant sun disk.He held it aloft, torchlight dancing on the metal.

“This belonged to a pharaoh of Egypt, thousands of years past—before the Medes, before the Achaemenids, when the first worshippers of the hidden light walked the Nile. A high relic, carried in secret through empires and exiles. Now it rests here, where serpent and spark meet.”

With reverence he placed the dagger upon the altar beside a wooden demon and bronze Aži Dahāka, the three artifacts gleaming together like pieces of a forgotten cosmos. Jan turned to Gulzar, eyes warm.

“Sit, my son. Smoke with me, and tell what you have seen.”

He packed the shared pipe with a pinch of Black Serpent, lit it, and passed it across. Gulzar drew deeply, the familiar darkness blooming sweet behind his eyes.

“The west is restless,” Gulzar said at last, exhaling slowly. “But the light burns there too—fierce and hidden.”

Jan nodded, taking the pipe. “As it must. You have served it well.”

They smoked in silence then, the incense and opium mingling, the ancient dagger watching over them like a golden eye from a deeper past.

The opium haze lingered sweetly in the vaulted chamber, the golden dagger catching flickers of torchlight on the altar. Jan drew deeply on the pipe once more, then passed it back to Gulzar, his eyes steady and ancient.

“There is one more task, my son—one that only a proven hand can undertake.

”Gulzar exhaled slowly, the smoke curling like a serpent toward the low ceiling.

“Speak it, father. I am listening.”Jan leaned forward.

“In the shadowed ruins of Persepolis, beneath the great terrace, lies a forgotten shaft tomb of an ancient king—not one of the high rock-cut sepulchers, but a deep pit grave from older days, sealed when Alexander’s flames devoured the palaces. Ancient texts whisper of a relic buried with him: the Emerald of Light, a stone green as deep water, said to hold a spark of the primal radiance. It is needed for rites that approach—rites that bind the scattered sparks closer.

“The location is veiled in the old writings, but close enough: south of the burned palaces, near the line of broken columns, a mound marked by a single fallen lion-capital half-buried in sand. Take stout rope, a lamp, and caution. Descend, seek the king’s chamber, and bring back the emerald. The light demands it.”

Gulzar nodded without hesitation.

“I know those ruins well. I will go, and return with the stone.”

Jan’s face broke into a rare, full smile.

“You have proved yourself blade and bearer both. The time has come. Tonight you join us fully—brother of the order.”

He rose and clapped his hands once. From side passages the chamber filled: twenty figures in plain black robes entering silently, hoods drawn back to reveal faces Gulzar knew—hermits, exiles, the scarred warlord, quiet women with intense eyes. They formed a loose circle around the altar, where the demon relic now rested.

Jan stood before Gulzar, voice resonant. “Kneel, seeker.”

Gulzar knelt on the carpet. The circle began a low chant as Jan lifted his arms.

“Great Aži Dahāka, thou coiled tyrant of flesh and blood,
thou three-headed lie that binds the spark in chains of dust—
we condemn thee, we name thee enemy of the true realm.
Thy scales are the body’s deceit, thy venom the greed of matter,
thy hunger the endless craving that devours the light within.”

“Yet even in thy shadow we praise the hidden flame—
the pure light beyond the stars, unchanging, unborn, undying.
From that radiance we came, to that radiance we return.
Let the serpent’s coils be broken, let the demon’s grip loosen,
let the inner spark rise unbound!”

The chant swelled, then stilled. Jan placed a hand on Gulzar’s head.

“By the light that pierces darkness, by the emerald yet hidden,
I name thee Brother of Light. Rise, Gulzar, initiate of the hidden order.”

Gulzar stood. A brother passed him a small, sharp knife of obsidian. Jan indicated the wooden demon statue.

“Spill a little blood upon the false form—proof that the body’s pain is illusion, that the flesh is but the serpent’s garment, while the true self is light eternal.”

Gulzar drew the blade across his left forearm—a shallow cut, bright blood welling at once. He let drops fall onto the carved horns and twisted face of the statue, watching them soak dark into the wood.

The circle murmured approval. The shared pipe passed again; thick opium smoke filled the chamber, loosening body and thought alike until the stone walls seemed to breathe.When

the rite ended, the black-robed brothers and sisters sat in loose groups on carpets, sharing strong black tea poured from a simmering samovar and plates of bread, cheese, dates, and roasted pistachios. Voices rose in quiet conversation—of visions seen in the smoke, of distant branches of the order, of the coming retrieval of the Emerald.

The scarred warlord clapped Gulzar's shoulder. "A clean cut, Brother of Light. The demon felt that one."

A woman with hennaed hands laughed softly. "And the light feels stronger for it."

Jan sat beside Gulzar, refilling his tea.

"Rest tonight here below. Tomorrow, or when the moon favors, ride for Persepolis. The emerald waits, and with it, deeper sight."

Gulzar drank the hot, bitter tea, the cut on his arm throbbing faintly beneath a clean linen binding. Around him the circle of black robes murmured and smoked, faces calm in the torchlight.For the first time, he felt truly among them—not seeker, but brother. The taste of blood and opium lingered on his tongue, twin sacraments of the hidden path.

Morning light filtered pale through the vaulted chamber as Gulzar rose from his pallet among the black-robed brothers and sisters. He bid Jan a quiet farewell, promising swift return with the Emerald of Light. By the time he reached home, the sun was high; Shirin greeted him with worried eyes but asked nothing of the fresh linen binding on his arm. He kissed her gently, packed anew—a long coil of stout hemp rope, flatbread and dried fruit, waterskin, his scimitar and dagger, an oil lamp with extra wick and flask—and saddled the chestnut gelding.The ride to Persepolis took three hard days across the familiar plateau, the ruins rising at last like charred bones against the mountains. Gulzar tethered his horse in a hidden wadi and began the search on foot, following Jan's veiled description: south of the burned palaces, near the line of broken columns, a mound marked by a fallen lion-capital.For two hours he wandered the desolate fringes—kicking through sand drifts, prying at suspicious stones—finding only shallow pits and wind-scoured rubble. Doubt gnawed at him until, in a shallow depression half-hidden by thorny acacia, he spotted it: a weathered lion-capital lying on its side, one paw raised eternally, the mound beside it subtly sunken, as though the earth had exhaled centuries ago.At the center yawned a narrow crevice, barely shoulder-wide, descending into blackness. Gulzar knotted one end of the rope around the thick trunk of a nearby tamarisk, tested it with his full weight, then slung his bag across his back and began the descent—hand over hand, boots scraping crumbling walls, dust sifting down like fine ash.Thirty feet down his feet struck solid stone. He lit the oil lamp; its yellow flame revealed a low stone tunnel stretching ahead, walls rough-hewn and laced with ancient cobwebs. The air was cold and still, carrying the faint must of undisturbed ages.He walked cautiously. The tunnel branched repeatedly—some passages ending in collapses, others narrowing to crawls. Twice he backtracked, marking turns with scratches from his dagger. At last the way opened into a small chamber: a plain stone sarcophagus resting on a

low dais, its lid carved with faded reliefs of a bearded king in profile.Gulzar set the lamp down and heaved against the heavy lid. Stone ground on stone; it shifted enough to reveal the interior. A desiccated body lay within, wrapped in rotted linen, adorned with golden amulets—solar disks, winged bulls, lotus flowers—and heavy rings on skeletal fingers. Beside the skull, on a bed of crumbled leather, gleamed the prize: a large emerald, deep green and flawless, catching the lamplight like trapped starfire.He gathered everything swiftly—amulets, rings, the emerald—stuffing them into his bag. Greed and triumph surged as he turned to leave.His boot pressed a slightly raised flagstone. A sharp click echoed.From hidden slits in the walls two arrows hissed forth. One buried itself deep in his right shoulder with a wet thud; the other pierced his left thigh just above the knee. Barbed heads—designed to hold fast.Pain exploded white-hot. Gulzar screamed, staggering against the sarcophagus before collapsing to the cold floor. Blood welled warm and swift, soaking his tunic and trousers. He lay groaning for what felt an eternity—an hour, perhaps more—trying to master the agony. The barbs defied pulling; each tug tore flesh anew. Finally, teeth gritted until they creaked, he snapped the shaft on the leg arrow and yanked the head through from behind. Fresh blood spurted, but the wound was free. He bound it tightly with a strip torn from his cloak, using hand and teeth to knot the cloth.Limping heavily, lamp in trembling hand, he retraced the twisting corridors, each step fire in his thigh. At the shaft he grasped the rope, but the shoulder wound screamed rebellion—muscle torn, arm near useless. He fell back, gasping.Desperate, he braced against the wall and wrenched at the shoulder arrow. The barb ripped free in a torrent of blood and shredded meat; he howled until his voice cracked. Still, the arm hung limp.Seven times he tried the climb—fingers slipping on blood-slick rope, body shaking, strength ebbing. Seven times he slid back to the stone floor.At last he slumped against the wall, lamp guttering low. The flame died with a soft pop, plunging him into absolute darkness.Silence pressed like earth already heaped upon him. Blood loss chilled his skin; dizziness swirled. With fumbling fingers he tore more cloth, binding shoulder and thigh as best he could in the black, knots pulled tight with teeth.He sat alone in the tomb's cold heart, breath shallow, thinking of Shirin's face, the unborn child, the fields waiting under open sky. Pain sharpened every thought of the body's frailty—its greed, its weakness, its inevitable betrayal.

"Curse this flesh," he whispered to the darkness, voice hoarse. "Curse the serpent that coils within it."

The emerald weighed heavy in the bag at his side—cold light trapped in stone, mocking the warm light he now feared he would never see again.

Absolute darkness pressed upon Gulzar like the weight of the earth itself. Time lost meaning—only the throb of wounds, the chill seeping from stone, and the slow drip of blood somewhere in the black. His bag still held flatbread and dried fruit, the waterskin half full. He rationed tiny bites, sips that barely wet his cracked lips, but bitterness filled him.

"For what?" he thought. "To stretch the dying a few days longer?"

Visions tormented him: Shirin heavy with child, rocking an infant he would never hold; the boy's face—his face—growing without a father's hand to guide it. Rage boiled beneath the pain. With a guttural snarl he grasped the rope again, hauling himself upward one-handed, good leg pushing against the wall. He gained a few meters, muscles screaming, blood soaking fresh through the bindings.Then the torn shoulder gave way entirely. His grip failed; he plummeted, crashing against the stone floor. The wounded leg took the brunt—bone grated, fresh agony lanced through him. He screamed like a beast stretched on the rack, raw and inhuman, until breath failed and darkness swallowed him whole.Hours later—perhaps half a day—he stirred, groaning. The blood flow from his shoulder had slowed to an ooze, but the leg wound wept warm and steady. He ate a morsel of bread, drank sparingly, and rebound the thigh with another strip torn from his tunic, knotting it fiercely with teeth and trembling fingers.

Three days dragged in that tomb-black silence. Thirst clawed worse than pain; weakness turned his limbs to lead. He whispered curses at his body, at greed, at the emerald now cursed in his bag.Then—faint, impossible—a voice echoed down the shaft.

"Gulzaaar! Gulzaaar!"

Hope flared like a struck flint. He drew breath until his lungs burned and bellowed upward, voice cracking: "I am here! I am here! Down in this hole! Help!"

Silence, then the voice again, closer.

"Hold, brother! I hear you!"Light flickered far above—a lamp descending.

The scarred warlord Yaghoub's grim face appeared at the crevice edge, framed against blessed twilight.

"Curse the darkness," Yaghoub shouted down. "I will get you out of there, Brother! Stay alive!"

The rope end dropped, splashing near Gulzar's feet. Yaghoub descended swiftly despite his bulk, lamp in teeth, until he stood over the bloodied figure.

"Damn this abyss," Yaghoub muttered, eyes widening at the pool of crimson. "This is bad. Arrows?"

Gulzar nodded weakly. "Old king's welcome."

"We have to leave this shithole." Yaghoub looped the rope under Gulzar's arms, knotting it tight across the chest.

"Hold fast."He climbed out, braced his legs against the tamarisk trunk, and hauled hand over hand.

The rope creaked; Gulzar's wounds reopened with every jolt, but slowly—agonizingly—he rose into open air. At the lip Yaghoub seized his collar with iron grip and dragged him clear. Gulzar collapsed on the sand, head striking a stone, vision sparking.

"Easy," Yaghoub growled, slinging Gulzar's good arm over his shoulder. "Lean on me. Horses are close."

They staggered across the dusk-lit ruins. Yaghoub watered both animals from his skin, then hoisted Gulzar—half-conscious—across his own saddle.

"Hold the mane, brother. Three days to your home. I will not let the light lose you yet."

The ride was torment blurred into endurance—nights under cold stars, days swaying in fever, Yaghoub forcing water and morsels between his lips, binding wounds afresh at each halt.

On the third evening the familiar rise appeared. Shirin ran from the doorway, crying out at the sight of the blood-soaked figure slumped against the scarred warlord.

"What happened?" she demanded, voice breaking as Yaghoub carried Gulzar inside and laid him on the bed.

Gulzar managed a cracked smile through cracked lips. "An old king… attacked me. Thought he could keep his treasures."

Shirin's hands flew to her mouth, tears falling as she began cutting away blood-stiffened cloth.Gulzar turned his head weakly toward Yaghoub.

"I owe you my life, brother. The light… repaid in shadow."

Yaghoub clasped his forearm gently. "Brothers settle no debts. Rest. I ride to tell Jan you live."

The door closed behind the warlord. Gulzar's eyes fluttered shut, fever pulling him under. He drifted in and out—Shirin's cool hands washing wounds, her voice murmuring prayers—until true sleep finally claimed him, deep and healing, beneath his own roof under the wide Persian sky.

Four days passed in a haze of fevered sleep and slow healing. Shirin tended him tirelessly—changing poultices of honey and boiled herbs, spooning broth between his lips, whispering encouragement when pain woke him gasping. The wounds closed grudgingly: the shoulder knitting into a puckered scar, the thigh stiff and throbbing but no longer weeping.On the fifth morning hoofbeats sounded outside. Shirin opened the door to Jan, dismounted from a gray mule, white robe dusty from the ride.

"Peace upon this house," the magus said, bowing slightly.

Shirin ushered him in with worried courtesy.Jan stood at the bedside, eyes softening at the sight of Gulzar pale against the bolsters.

“Glad to see you made it, Brother. I did not wish to disturb the healing—you needed rest more than words. May strength return swiftly.”

Gulzar managed a weak smile.

“I nearly fed the old king’s shadows, father. Arrows from the walls—barbed, hidden. I thought the darkness had claimed me.”

Jan sighed, settling on a low stool. “Yes… I should have warned you. This old head forgets. Not all crypts, but a king’s—some still guard their sleep with cunning. Forgive me.”

He leaned forward and laid weathered hands gently over the bandaged shoulder and thigh. His voice dropped to a murmur, the ancient prayer rising soft and steady:

“Light beyond the turning sky,
spark that no shadow can quench,
flow into this vessel of dust.
Burn away the chains of pain,
restore the flame within the flesh,
until body serves spirit once more.”

A faint warmth spread beneath Jan’s palms—like sunlight seen behind closed eyelids. Gulzar felt a subtle shift, a loosening in his chest, strength trickling back into weary limbs. Whether true power or hopeful imagination, it eased him all the same.

“Thank you, father,” he whispered.With his good arm Gulzar reached for the bag beside the bed, drew out the emerald, and placed it in Jan’s hand. The stone caught the window light, deep green fire pulsing within.

“Here. This is what the old king hid. He has no more need of it.”

Jan turned the gem slowly, wonder in his eyes. “Beautiful. The texts spoke truth. It will serve the greater rites well.”

He rose, went outside, and returned with a leather pouch from his saddle. He set it on the blanket—heavy with silver drachmae and a handful of gleaming gold darics.

“For your pain and your loyalty, brother. Rest, grow strong. When you can walk without limp, come to the temple beneath the ruins. We will wait.”

He clasped Gulzar’s forearm gently and left as quietly as he had come, the mule’s hooves fading into the morning. A week later Gulzar could hobble about the house, leaning on a staff Shirin had carved from olive wood. The leg still pulled when he put full weight, the

shoulder stiff, but each day brought more motion.Two weeks more and the limp was barely noticeable; he could draw his bow again, swing the scimitar in slow practice arcs under the tamarisk.Then, on a warm spring night scented with blooming poppy, Shirin's pains began. Gulzar went running for the village midwife, the birth came swift. By lamplight, with the old woman's calm guidance, Gulzar supported his wife, holding her hands, wiping her brow, murmuring encouragement as she bore down.

At last a thin cry pierced the quiet—a daughter, small and perfect, dark hair damp against her scalp.Shirin wept with exhaustion and joy, cradling the child to her breast. Gulzar stared in awe, tears cutting clean paths through the dust on his cheeks.

"She is beautiful," he whispered, voice breaking. "Like her mother."

Shirin smiled up at him, weary and radiant. "What shall we name her?"

Gulzar touched the tiny fingers that curled around his own. "Roxana—bright as the dawn we almost lost."

The midwife chuckled softly. "A good name for a brave girl. She came into the world fighting, just like her father."

Outside, the poppy fields swayed crimson under starlight, and in the hush of the house a new life breathed—small, soft, and full of unspoken promise.

Summer ripened the fields under a relentless sun, the poppies long harvested and the wheat plot golden with promise. Roxana, now a sturdy infant with her mother's dark eyes, gurgled in Shirin's arms as Gulzar saddled his horse one morning. His wounds had healed into stiff scars, reminders of the crypt's bite, but strength had returned enough for daily rides.

"I go to Istakhr," he told Shirin, kissing her forehead. "To speak of more land—opium fields to expand our stores."

She nodded, worry creasing her brow. "Ride safe, husband."

Land of the Serpent

He arrived in the bustling city by midday, weaving through markets thick with spice scents and haggling voices. In a shaded courtyard near the palace remnants lived Kasra, left-hand

man to the local clan head Mufaddal—a shrewd enforcer in embroidered tunic, his beard oiled and fingers heavy with rings.Gulzar approached respectfully, bowing.

"Peace upon you, Kasra. I am Gulzar of Matezzish. I seek to buy land near my plot—fertile ground for more wheat."

Kasra eyed him appraisingly from his cushioned seat, sipping date wine.

"Wheat, eh? Ambitious for a farmer. But before we speak of new land, there's the matter of your current holdings. Mufaddal demands tax—ten percent of your yield, in silver or grain. All pay now; you must start."

Gulzar's face hardened. "Tax? The land is mine, bought full and fair from old Darius years back. I owe no man tribute for what I own."

Kasra chuckled coldly. "Ownership? In these times? Mufaddal's protection covers all in this district. The others pay—why should you freeload? Those who haven't yet… they will soon, whether they like it or not. Refuse, and see how quickly rivals eye your fields."

Gulzar's voice rose, fists clenching.

"Protection? This is theft dressed in fine words! I've toiled that earth with my own hands—cleared stones, dug wells, planted seeds. What right has Mufaddal to skim my sweat? The system is absurd—men like you sit idle while we break our backs, then demand a share as if you birthed the crop yourself!"

Kasra leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "Absurd? Without order, chaos reigns. Pay the tax, or face the consequences. We keep the peace—raiders from the hills, disputes settled by our blades. Your 'ownership' means nothing without our shadow over it."

"Peace? You create the threats to justify your greed! I don't need your blades—I carry my own. This tax is robbery, plain and vile. You parasites think yourselves 'higher' than us, so you deserve to rob the honest? What do I get for this tribute? Will you come toil my field at dawn, bent under the sun? Will you fix my leaking roof when rains come? Or guard my well from drying?"

Kasra slammed his cup down, face reddening. "Insolent dog! No, we won't grub in your dirt like peasants. But you stay alive because of us! We protect these lands from rival tribes and clans—nomads who'd burn your fields, steal your wife, slaughter your stock. Without Mufaddal's men, you'd be bones in the dust. Pay up, or we'll collect it ourselves—with interest!"

Gulzar spat on the ground, rage boiling over. "Protect? You use that as an excuse to rob good folk blind! I've faced bandits before—killed them with my own steel. I don't need your 'shadow'—it's a curse, sucking the life from honest work. Demand all you want; I'll pay

nothing. My land, my yield, my blood. Come take it if you dare—you'll find arrows waiting, not silver!"

Kasra surged to his feet, hand on his dagger hilt. "You dare defy Mufaddal? We'll see how bold you are when our riders come at night! Pay now, or regret it—your fields razed, your house ashes. This is no request; it's law in these parts!"

"Law? Your law is a thief's code! I bow to no man's greed. Keep your protection—I'll protect my own. And tell Mufaddal: if he sends men, they'll water my soil with their blood!"

The argument echoed through the courtyard, voices rising to shouts that drew stares from passers-by. Kasra's face twisted in fury, demands thundering; Gulzar's rage matched it, fists shaking as he hurled insults at the clan's tyranny. Finally, with a final curse, Gulzar spun on his heel and stormed out, mounting his horse without a backward glance.No silver changed hands. The air hummed with unspoken threat as he rode homeward, the sun dipping low like a warning flame.

A week slipped by in the quiet rhythm of harvest work—Gulzar overseeing hired hands threshing wheat, Shirin nursing Roxana beneath the tamarisk shade, the air thick with chaff and the sweet scent of ripening pomegranates.Then, on a windless afternoon, three riders appeared on the horizon: hard men in dust-colored cloaks, horses lathered from a fast ride. They reined up before the house, dismounted without ceremony, and strode through the open doorway as though they owned the threshold.Gulzar stood from the low table where he had been mending a harness, hand already near his scimitar. Shirin clutched Roxana closer and slipped quietly into the inner room. The leader—a thickset man with a braided beard and Mufaddal's eagle badge on his chest—planted his feet wide.

"Gulzar of Matezzish. Tax time. Ten sacks of wheat or the silver equivalent. Now."

Gulzar's eyes narrowed to slits. "Go to hell, shits. Get off my land now."

The second rider, lean and pockmarked, laughed harshly. "Big words for a lone farmer. Pay up, or we take what's owed—and more for the insult."

The third, youngest and cockiest, spat on the packed-earth floor. "Mufaddal's patience ends today. Hand it over, or we burn the rest after we load the grain."

Gulzar stepped forward, voice low and venomous. "You ride onto my soil, foul my house, threaten my family? I told your master's dog the same: I pay no tribute to parasites. This land is mine—bought, bled for, worked by my hands. Take one step toward my stores and you'll leave here in pieces."

The leader sneered. "Parasites? We keep order. Without us, steppe wolves would have stripped this place bare long ago."

“Order?” Gulzar snarled. “Your order is a leash around honest necks. I’ve killed raiders before you were old enough to hold a sword. I need no protection from thieves who call themselves lords.”

The pockmarked man drew his blade halfway. “Enough talk. If you won’t pay, we’ll take it all —wheat, horse, even the woman if she’s comely.”

Gulzar’s scimitar flashed free in a single motion. “Touch anything here and you die screaming.”

The young one lunged toward the storage shed, shouting, “I’ll start with the grain!”

Gulzar moved like a striking serpent. His curved blade swept up and across, biting deep into the young man’s throat. Blood sprayed in a bright arc, splattering the mud-brick wall as the body staggered, hands clutching the gaping wound, then crumpled gurgling to the floor.The leader roared and charged, sword high. The pockmarked man flanked from the side.Steel rang on steel. Gulzar parried the leader’s heavy downward cut, twisted inside, and hacked with all his weight. The scimitar sheared through neck and collarbone—the head toppled free, body collapsing in a fountain of crimson.The last man thrust desperately. Gulzar sidestepped, blade ripping upward in a vicious disembowelment. Steel grated on mail before plunging deep; entrails spilled steaming onto the earth as the man screamed, folding around the wound.Silence fell, broken only by the wet drip of blood and the distant bleat of goats.Gulzar stood panting amid the carnage, blade dripping. He wiped it slowly on the leader’s cloak, then dragged the bodies one by one out into the field, heels carving furrows in the dust.At the far corner, beyond sight of the house, he dug with furious energy—spade biting deep until a wide pit yawned. He rolled the corpses in, one atop the other, then shoveled earth over them, tamping it firm with the spade’s flat.“These roaches make good fertilizer for my poppy,” he muttered, a grim smile cracking his blood-flecked face.He returned to the house, washed hands and face in the basin, and sat at the table where Shirin had quietly set out bread, yogurt, and roasted eggplant. She said nothing of the blood on the walls; only pressed his hand briefly as he ate.When the plates were empty, Gulzar packed his pipe with Black Serpent, lit it from the hearth coal, and drew deeply. The opium unfurled warm and slow, softening the edges of violence, quieting the thunder in his veins.Outside, the sun dipped toward the hills, casting long shadows across the fresh-turned earth at the field’s edge—where three new seeds now nourished the soil in silence.

Some days passed in uneasy quiet, the poppy fields swaying heavy with late-summer pods, the wheat safely stored. Gulzar worked the land with hired hands who asked no questions, his scars itching under the sun as reminders of old debts paid in blood.Then, on a brazen afternoon, six riders thundered onto his land—Kasra at their head, face thunder-dark, flanked by five armed men in Mufaddal’s colors. They reined up before the house, horses snorting dust.Kasra cupped hands to mouth and bellowed, “Gulzar! Come out, peasant!

Now!”Gulzar stepped from the doorway, expression calm but eyes cold. He slid his dagger into his belt, slung the scimitar across his back, and walked forward unarmed in appearance.

Kasra glared down from the saddle. “My three men came here days ago to collect what is owed. They did not return. They visited other lands, yes—but yours was the last. Where are they?”

Gulzar shrugged, a faint smile tugging his lips. “I have no idea. Haven’t seen any men here. Probably got lost on their way.”

He let out a short, mocking laugh.Kasra’s face purpled. “You dare mock me, peasant? I will teach you respect!”

He uncoiled a short leather whip from his saddle and lashed it across Gulzar’s face. The thong cracked like thunder, opening a burning welt from cheek to jaw.Blood trickled warm down Gulzar’s chin.

Kasra leaned forward, snarling, “Now—where are my soldiers? Did you commit murder, dog?”

Gulzar’s smile vanished.

“Arrest that peasant!” Kasra roared to his men. “Throw him in the dungeon—I’ll teach this cur manners!”

Two riders dismounted and strode toward Gulzar, hands reaching to seize his arms.In a blur the scimitar cleared its sheath. Gulzar’s first strike drove straight through the chest of the nearest man, point bursting out the back in a spray of red. As the body sagged, he ripped the blade free and swung wide—the curved edge caught the second man across the throat, nearly severing head from neck. Both dropped like emptied sacks, blood pooling dark in the dust.The remaining two riders leapt down, swords flashing. A fierce clash erupted—steel ringing, horses shying. One man swept low, hooking Gulzar’s leg and sending him sprawling. The other stabbed quick—a deep thrust into Gulzar’s thigh. Pain flared white-hot, but Gulzar rolled, parrying the follow-up. He countered viciously, blade slicing upward into the first attacker’s groin. The man howled, staggering; Gulzar’s next blow aimed for the head but glanced high, scalping a bloody strip of flesh and hair. Skull gleamed wetly beneath; the man fainted face-first into the dirt.

The last rider pressed hard—boot slamming into Gulzar’s stomach, fist smashing his nose with a crunch of cartilage. A sword slash opened a deep gash along Gulzar’s side; he crouched, gasping, blood soaking his tunic.Then rage surged. Gulzar lunged upward like a wounded wolf, driving his scimitar into the man’s belly to the hilt. He twisted and yanked sideways—intestines spilled steaming onto the ground as the rider screamed and collapsed.

Kasra sat frozen on his horse, eyes wide with horror. “No… no! You cannot do this! I—I am envoy to Mufaddal himself! You will not go unpunished! Put the sword down NOW!”

Gulzar, breathing ragged, face blood-streaked, advanced. “Your master can join you.”

He sprang forward. The scimitar flashed once—straight into Kasra’s open mouth, point piercing palate and brain. The envoy’s eyes bulged; he toppled sideways from the saddle, dead before he hit the earth.Silence fell, broken only by the nervous stamp of horses and the drip of blood.Gulzar leaned on his sword a moment, gathering breath, then began the grim work. One by one he dragged the six fresh corpses to the same far corner of the field, heels carving furrows. The spade bit deep again—earth flying in rhythmic arcs until a wider pit gaped.

He rolled the bodies in, Kasra last, staring sightless at the sky. Soil rained down, covering bloodied faces and ruined flesh.Gulzar tamped the mound flat, whispering to the turned earth, “The Black Serpent is happy. But how many more will it need?”He limped back to the house, washed the blood from his hands and face, bound the new wounds as best he could. Shirin met him at the door, pale but steady, and helped him inside without a word.Later, when the sun bled red across the plain, Gulzar sat beneath the tamarisk, pipe in hand, drawing deep on the dark opium. Smoke curled upward like a question into the darkening sky.The field lay quiet. Beneath it, seven men now fed the roots in silence.

The next dawn found Gulzar saddled and riding eastward through the morning haze, his fresh wounds bound tightly but aching with every jolt. The yard behind him bore faint scars of the recent burials, but the poppy fields bloomed indifferent. He reached the ruined terraces by midday, descending the hidden stairs to find Yaghoub sharpening a broad scimitar in the cool vaulted chamber.

“Brother,” Gulzar said, voice low. “I may be in deeper shadow than before. A dispute with Mufaddal’s clan—his men came demanding tax. I refused. Words turned to blades. Nine lie dead now, feeding my soil. But my wife, my child—they need guarding. More will come.”

Yaghoub set down the whetstone, scarred face darkening. “I’ve heard whispers of that bastard Mufaddal. His clan squeezes coin from folk like leeches on a wound—extortion in the name of ‘protection.’ Worry not, Brother . The order stands with its own.”

He rose and called out; three more ex-warlords emerged from the shadows—hardened men with notched blades and eyes like flint: Darius the Bull, a giant with a braided beard; Ardeshir, lean and quick as a steppe fox; and Bahram, whose face bore the pockmarks of old battles.

“We ride,” Yaghoub declared. “No clan tyrant touches one of ours.”

They mounted swift horses and galloped back to Gulzar's farm. As the sun dipped low, Gulzar hurried Shirin and little Roxana into the thick bushes beyond the field, where thorns and shadows would hide them.

"Stay silent, my love," he whispered, kissing her fiercely. "We end this tonight."

The five men waited inside the house, weapons drawn, peering through reed curtains as dusk fell—not yet full dark, the sky bruised purple.Hoofbeats thundered first, then sixteen riders crested the rise—Mufaddal at their fore, a burly chieftain in gilded mail, his face twisted with fury, flanked by armored thugs bearing torches and spears.

Yaghoub gripped Gulzar's shoulder. "Go out, brother. Tell him to leave. When they charge, we strike."

Gulzar stepped into the yard, scimitar sheathed but hand ready. "You must leave my land. Now."

Mufaddal reined up, his men fanning out in a half-circle. He laughed, a guttural bark. "You are not demanding anything, slave! Where is my friend Kasra? Where are his men? They vanished after coming to your wretched hovel!"

Gulzar met his gaze steadily. "The Serpent took them."

Mufaddal's face twisted in puzzlement, then rage. "Serpent? You speak madness, dog! I'll flay the truth from your hide!"

He raised a gauntleted hand. "Attack! Burn it all—take him alive for the rack!"

The riders spurred forward, swords gleaming, torches flaring. At that instant Yaghoub burst from the house like a storm unleashed, the three ex-warlords at his heels. They vaulted onto the nearest four of Mufaddal's horses—Darius seizing reins and slashing a throat in one fluid motion, blood jetting black in the twilight; Ardeshir leaping high to drag a rider down and bury his dagger in the man's eye; Bahram twisting mid-air to sever a jugular with a backhand cut. Yaghoub, the old war-beast, roared like a lion of the steppes. He twirled his mount in a deadly whirl, scimitar sweeping wide—two heads tumbled free in swift arcs, necks parting like butter under the honed edge, bodies slumping from saddles in sprays of crimson.Chaos erupted.

Mufaddal's men wheeled, shouting alarms—"Ambush! Kill them!"—but the surprise shattered their line.

Gulzar sprinted into the fray, blade flashing; he parried a thrusting spear and hacked through a rider's arm at the elbow, then drove upward into the exposed gut, steel grating on mail before bursting through.Swords clashed in furious rhythm—grunts, screams, the wet thud of flesh parting. Darius bellowed as he cleaved a man's shoulder to sternum, bone cracking like dry wood; Ardeshir danced between two foes, dagger weaving a red web

across throats; Bahram took a shallow slash to the ribs but countered with a brutal thrust that impaled his attacker through the mouth.Gulzar dueled a snarling veteran—blades locking, sparks flying—until he feinted low and ripped upward, spilling bowels in a steaming tangle. Another charged; Gulzar sidestepped, hamstringing the horse and finishing the fallen rider with a downward chop.

Mufaddal, eyes blazing, spurred straight for Yaghoub. “You dare defy me, old fool?”Their swords met in a thunderous clash. Mufaddal’s blow glanced off Yaghoub’s guard and sliced his hand deep, blood spraying.

Yaghoub snarled, pain fueling fury. “That all you have, tyrant?”He surged forward, blade a whirlwind. Mufaddal parried once, twice—then Yaghoub’s strike landed true, shearing through neck in a clean arc. The chieftain’s head spun free, body toppling as blood fountained from the stump.

The last of Mufaddal’s men broke and fled, but Ardeshir and Bahram cut them down mid-retreat—spears through backs, blades across hamstrings.The yard lay littered with bodies—sixteen twisted forms leaking red into the dust, horses milling riderless. Yaghoub bound his bleeding hand with a strip torn from a dead man’s cloak, grimacing but triumphant.

Gulzar wiped his blade, chest heaving. “It is done. The Serpent is sated—for now.”

Yaghoub clapped his good hand on Gulzar’s shoulder. “Aye, brother. And the light burns brighter without such shadows.”

As full night fell, they dragged the corpses to the field's edge, digging deep under starlight.

As the last torch sputtered out in the blood-soaked yard, Gulzar clasped Yaghoub's uninjured forearm, then embraced each of the ex-warlords in turn. "Brothers of Light, you have saved my home—my life. The Serpent bite tonight, but the spark endures because of you."

Yaghoub grunted, wiping blood from his blade. "No debt among brothers. Mufaddal's shadow lifts; the plains will breathe freer now."Darius the Bull clapped Gulzar's back, nearly staggering him. "Ride with the light, farmer. We'll spread word—the clan is broken."Ardeshir and Bahram nodded farewell, mounting their horses. "Call if shadows rise again," Bahram said gruffly.

They rode into the night, leaving Gulzar to summon Shirin from hiding. She emerged with Roxana asleep in her arms, eyes wide at the carnage. "It is over?" she whispered.

Gulzar held her close. "Over. The light prevailed."

In the coming weeks, as wounds healed and the earth drank the last traces of blood, Gulzar widened his holdings. With Mufaddal's clan shattered—his men scattered or dead—the lands around Istakhr fell free from extortion's grip. Villagers and nomads claimed abandoned plots, fences falling like old chains. Many expanded their farmlands, sowing wheat and barley in vast new swaths; the region bloomed into a production center, yields swelling under untaxed hands. Trade caravans multiplied along the roads, laden with grain, dates, and hides; Istakhr swelled as a hub, its markets buzzing louder, drawing merchants from distant satrapies.Gulzar hired villagers to till fresh acres, paying fair silver.

"Plant more poppy," he instructed them one dawn, as they gathered with spades.

"The Black Serpent thrives in this soil—deeper roots, richer tears."A young farmer nodded eagerly. "As you say, master Gulzar. We'll make the fields sing with crimson."

Production doubled, then tripled. In years, fortune flowed like the rivers after rain. Gulzar sold balls of Black Serpent to caravans in Istakhr's squares—traders seeking him out by name.

"You the one with the Black Serpent?" a Bactrian merchant asked one market day, coins jingling. "Heard it's stronger than steppe wine—eases the long roads."

Gulzar weighed a ball in his palm. "Pure as night. Two hundred drachmae the hundred grams. It'll carry your dreams to the horizon."

Word spread; his name echoed among traders and folk of the Istakhr lands: Gulzar the Poppy Lord, the man who broke a clan with blade and bloom.Wealth transformed their lives. Gulzar bought fine linen tunics dyed indigo for himself, embroidered robes for Shirin, tiny silks for Roxana. He extended the house—adding rooms of baked brick, laying normal

wooden floors that creaked warmly underfoot, building a grand hearth of stone where fires roared against winter's chill. Their table groaned with feasts: roasted lamb spiced with cumin, fresh bread slathered in yogurt, bowls of pistachios and mulberries.

"Eat well, little one," Gulzar murmured to Roxana, now toddling, as she gnawed a fig. "The land gives back what we give it."

Jan visited often, sharing tea by the new hearth. "The light shines brighter in your house, brother," the magus said one evening, eyes twinkling. "You've turned shadow to soil."

Gulzar poured more brew. "And the order? The Emerald serves?"

Jan nodded. "Rites deepen. Come to the temple soon—we chant under the waning moon."

Gulzar frequented the ruins, descending to the vaulted chamber for rituals: circles of black-robed seekers, opium smoke thick as they praised the inner light and condemned the flesh's chains. He continued to smoke daily, the Black Serpent a quiet companion, easing scars both seen and unseen.Yet in quiet moments, pipe in hand, he gazed across his vast fields and whispered to the wind: "How far the Serpent coils now."